

Leadership: influence beyond authority

This was the definition of leadership that was given during the Leadership Potential Seminar, a two week course of instruction sponsored by the Office of Personnel Management. My experience with this class began when I answered the solicitation in ALCOAST 549/06 and was accepted to fill one of the Coast Guard training slots at the class which took place in March of 2007 at the Western Management Development Center in Denver Colorado. Students in this class were from various agencies within the Federal Government. One other person from the CG was in the class; he was an officer and likely the only non-GS employee in the group.

On the first day, the definition of leadership was given as

“influence beyond authority”.

This falls right in line with the CG definition which is

“you influencing others to achieve a goal”.

To help the student's understand and personalize the “influence beyond authority” concept, the question was asked, “would you follow your leaders if they were not in their current positions of authority?” The question bears consideration at lower levels of the chain of command, however, my opinion is that our Commandant passes the “influence beyond authority” test and is a true leader that many would choose to follow regardless of his position.

The goals of the Leadership Potential Seminar, as stated in ALCOAST 549-/06, are;

- Enable participants to develop the leadership competencies needed for the Coast Guard to continue leading in the extraordinary manner that is part of our organizational character
- Allow participants to “blend” learning experiences throughout their respective careers and provide a progression for maximum development of the competencies addressed at www.uscg.mil/leadership/lead/comp.htm
- Provides professionals with an understanding of the foundations of leadership

The class clearly met those objectives and much more.

The opening session was called “Mapping out our Journey” during which the concept of a “Leadership Mosaic” was introduced. Students were supplied with a piece of notepaper that had outlined puzzle pieces pictured on it. Each puzzle piece had the heading of a class learning module and provided space for key ideas to be written within its borders. The mosaic was, and still is, a visual reminder of how all the pieces that are to be learned about leadership, fit together to form the whole and provide a simplified “systems perspective” of leadership.

Also discussed were “Leadership moments” and how they are opportunities to exercise influence and can help bridge the gap between you and others. “Leadership moments” naturally occur on a regular basis under various circumstances and how we individually

approach and take advantage of these moments helps to determine the quality of our leadership.

The rather simplistic but very important point was made that in order to take advantage of the leadership possibilities that are presented to us (influencing others); that we must first have our own act together.

Typical in these type of classes and settings students go through a participative “Best boss/Worst boss” listing exercise where the group lists attributes of the best boss they have ever had. This class was no exception and we too underwent such an exercise. In this particular class our list of best boss attributes could be narrowed down to

- being a good communicator and providing constructive feedback
- fostered an environment where employees were genuinely valued and recognized
- demonstrated trust in and respect for employees

We were also shown that same attributes also apply to “Best Co-worker”, so these are Leadership traits that we not only appreciate in others, but should develop ourselves.

One of the simpler but unique and effective class exercises related to what the course called “Relationship glasses”. This exercise enabled students to examine their own relationships by identifying and naming pictures of glasses in a personal workbook for individuals with whom we had a professional or even personal relationship. On each glass, we marked a line indicating the current fill level based on an overall consideration of our relationship. The people with whom we had the strongest relationships would have the line near the top indicating a full glass while those we barely had contact with could have a line near the bottom and a nearly empty relationship glass. As we partnered up with another student and outlined to them some of the factors contributing to the fill level of our relationship glasses, it forced us to recognize that while perception can play a large role, that we ourselves are the common element to all of our relationships and that most often we are the primary factor in determining the state of any of our relationship glasses.

As we were just embarking on our two week leadership learning adventure, one of the classes’ deliverables, a team project, was introduced. The project was for all students to choose and read a book on leadership from a selection that was offered. Based on the book we picked, we formed the teams that would proceed to read and discuss the book, culminating with a presentation to be delivered on the last day of class. Our guidelines were to develop a 20 minute presentation on the primary lessons learned from our particular book. Every member of the team needed to participate in the presentation and each team had to develop an accompanying 2-3 page handout or summary.

In one early learning module within the class, the guest speaker discussed the “Physical Dimension of Leadership”. This session primarily discussed exercise, diet and their impact on a leader’s ability to effectively do the things that are needed. During this session we were all given pedometers and taught how to use them. We were challenged to add 1000 steps to our day and at the same time reduce our daily calorie intake by 100. We were told that one of the easiest ways to remove 100 calories from our diet was to cut down on soft drinks, so my personal choice was to eliminate sugared soft drinks.

“Communication, Creativity, and Humor” was a wonderful learning module with perhaps the greatest impact on me personally. This section was presented by a gentleman named Robert Wells who founded, and very appropriately represents, what is called the “World Humor Organization”. Overall the presentation focused on infusing humor into leadership which can lead to innovation as well as more effective interactions with those you work and do business with. During this session, we ran through some exercises that were designed to help us loosen up and laugh. Having delivered it to many fortune 500 companies, Mr. Wells’ presentation is highly recommended. A concept called “Mental Floss” is used to show stuffy executives, as well as Government employees at all levels, how to listen to each other while opening up themselves. There was a more serious side to this presentation in which he emphasized how all this fun feeds into leadership and life. The “Leadership Mosaic” started to come together as the class realized that skills from this module, “Communications, Creativity and Humor”, would definitely play a large role in our ability to take advantage of most “Leadership Moments” and contribute to the “influence factor” required in leadership.

A large section of the class was titled “The Nine Natural Laws of Leadership”. This, in my opinion, was one of the best parts of the class. The module was a full day and a half and I do not think I looked at my watch or Treo once. The presenter/author, Warren Blank, has his books available on amazon.com but I would very highly recommend that you also see him in person. It is difficult for me to summarize his presentation because I know I would not do it justice. I even hesitate to list the Nine Natural Laws because they would require the personal and specific explanations found in either Warren Blank’s book or in his live presentation. The learning module was mingled with practical group exercises and interaction, which helped the team grow as well as emphasizing leadership concepts.

As with everything, not all learning modules in this class were of equal quality. A significant amount of this course is not being mentioned because the subject matter has been exhaustively addressed within the CG culture. Therefore, I can very highly recommend only portions of the Leadership Potential Seminar.

As the class was winding down, the Leadership Mosaic was discussed again, just as it was each and every day. This final review gave us an opportunity to reflect on the leadership elements that we learned about over the entire length of the class and how they all fit together. This session also allowed us an opportunity to ask questions and finalize our class individual development plans (IDP) that we had been building. The function of those plans, and this exercise, was to focus on those “nuggets” of information gleaned from the class that we could individually take back home and to our respective offices. As this exercise closed, we chose one or more fellow classmates and shared our class IDP then asked if they would be willing to help us attain our goals by making periodic progress checks. For example, there is a classmate who named me on her class IDP and I am committed to checking in with her once a month regarding the development items she listed.

In the morning of our last day, a rather elaborate exercise gave us the opportunity to use our new found leadership skills in a practical way. The class was divided up so that half of the students played the role of management and half played employees. Upon completion of the exercise we all sat down with the instructors for a debrief or a hot-wash discussion. It was clear that during this exercise those in manager roles used leadership skills to accomplish an objective, it was also apparent that those playing the

part of employees also found it absolutely necessary to have knowledge of leadership concepts in order to follow accurately and efficiently. Individual integrity played a part in this exercise and clearly all of the CG competencies included in **“leading self”** were illustrated.

As anticipated, the afternoon of the last day included the team presentations. When selecting books, I ended up picking one that I had been meaning to read for quite a while, “The Founding Fathers on Leadership” by Don Philips. Our presentation was rather straightforward with a few PowerPoint slides and each of our team members presenting one or two. Other presentations were more ambitious. One team did a Jeopardy skit with a made up Abe Lincoln being one of the contestants. Another group played reporters asking questions as someone dressed as Eleanor Roosevelt held a press conference talking about her views on leadership.

The farewell of this two week course was a graduation ceremony. As opposed to the standard, call people up in alphabetical order, give them a certificate and shake the hand of the instructor routine; I found this approach very interesting. To start off with, the instructor randomly shuffled the certificates then called the first person up to present his. The person was then left standing at the front of the room where he had 30 seconds to share his parting thoughts with the rest of the class (we were all told earlier in the week that we would each be front and center so we could be somewhat prepared). That person then took the next certificate, called the name of the next student and presented the next person with their certificate who then had their 30 seconds in the spotlight. This went on and it was interesting to watch as students introduced and congratulated each other followed by each expressing their parting thoughts.

I deeply appreciate the opportunity to attend this course and meet the people that I did. As is typical for me in classes, I enjoyed the chance to focus on and observe the other students and instructors with their questions and responses. The exposure I got in this class to employees from many different government agencies, gave me a greater appreciation for the leadership and other opportunities that we have within the CG. As CG employees, we are privileged to work for an organization that has clearly outlined leadership competencies, has in place a standard management framework (CPEC), and offers the leadership tools found in LAMS, SLIPS, and the ULDP.

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